

Homily for Good Friday April 10, 2020

Many years ago, my wife and I spent a weekend on the Virginia shore at Assateague, which is, of course, next to the famous island of Chincoteague, home of the wild ponies. It was a beautiful Saturday morning in May, and we sat out in our car to explore the environs. We got tired of driving down the main road in the area, so at length we turned onto a side dirt road and drove a short way, until we came to a wooded area. On our right was a pond, and we decided to get out of the car and walk around.

We had no sooner gotten out of our car and started walking, then when a livestock truck came driving up behind us and then pulled to a stop in front of us. Out of the back of the truck came maybe eight or ten diminutive men—none of them could have been much over five feet tall. They were dressed in overalls, and most of them had teeth missing. I could see that none of them were of surpassing intellect, and I surmised that they were the collective product of generations of local inbreeding. They carried fishing poles, and we were alarmed to see that two of them were armed with shotguns.

They stared at us and one whom I assumed to be the leader of this group stepped up, and said to us, “Whar’ ye from?” I replied, “Good morning, we’re from Washington, D.C.” That meant nothing to him. Repeatedly he said, “Whar’ye from?” “Why, we’re from Washington, the nation’s capital”, I responded again. “Whar’ ye from?” he kept asking, and others joined in the question. Perceiving that obviously we were encroaching upon their fishing hole, we slowly began backing up to our car, and I simply said, “Have a nice day,” as they stared at us. We managed to drive away without further incident.

This moment in my life, surreal and incongruous, and like something out of an Ingmar Bergman movie, comes to my mind each Good Friday, when in the Gospel of John, a desperate and frightened Pilate finally asks Jesus, “Where are you from?” There is as much a disconnect between Pilate and Jesus as there was between us and the little men we saw that day. The dialogue between the two is my favorite part of John’s passion narrative. Pilate begins as the man of power, the local administrative authority whose job it is to interrogate Jesus. I often wonder how to enunciate the question “Are you the King of the Jews?”, when we have read the Passion narrative in parts. Is it spoken as an administrative formality? Or is it said with disbelieving skepticism? Jesus responds to Pilate in a calm, measured way, that I think also conveys a message of love. He assures Pilate that he (Pilate) really has no power over him—except what has been given to him from above. When Pilate asks him about being a king, Jesus calmly replies that his kingdom is not an earthly realm—it is from above. It is not about violence and domination. Jesus has come into the world to testify to the truth. Pilate famously responds, “What is truth?” Is it a cynical, scathing reply, or does it manifest Pilate’s confusion and despair about his own powerlessness and lack of understanding?

In the presence of God’s love in Christ, Pilate’s imperial power gets reduced to nothing—but he cannot respond with love in kind; instead he weakly acquiesces to the demands of the religious leaders outside, who have already decided that the love that they have witnessed in Christ is a

dangerous commodity that must be destroyed. Crucify him! One thing that Good Friday exposes is the truth of a statement once made by the psychiatrist Robert Stoller: “Ours is not a very loving species.” We have all crucified Jesus in one way or another in our own lives.

And yet, we see that Jesus simply continues to pour out his love in John’s passion narrative. “He just keeps giving, and giving, and giving!” exclaimed a former parishioner of mine.

We would do well to dwell on his love, on this darkest day of the year for us as Christians. Where do we find ourselves in the story today? There are many persons to think about in this narrative, but I would suggest that many of us might find ourselves identifying with a person who shows up at the very end of today’s gospel—his name is Nicodemus. We last saw him in the third chapter of John, and this year on the second Sunday in Lent, the first Sunday in which we couldn’t be together as a worshipping community because of coronavirus. There Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, and in the ensuing dialogue Nicodemus was left groping in the dark, unable to understand what Jesus meant by being “born from above”, or “born again”. A smug “born again” Christian might readily dismiss Nicodemus—but here he shows up again—again at night, with Joseph of Arimathea. Together they took Jesus’ body and wrapped it, with spices that Nicodemus had brought, in a linen cloth.

I can only imagine Nicodemus touching the wounds on Christ’s broken body, and wondering, “Is this what his life, his teaching, his wisdom, his love, has all come to?” And yet, Nicodemus, like us who watch and wait, has shown up. And like him, we are all in the darkness at this moment—staring at death, and wondering when this pandemic will end. Is this what our lives have come to? What about all who have been grievously lost to the illness, who days before had been happy, and healthy, going about their daily routines? As we watch, and wait, and think also of the mystery of God’s love upon a spearhead, God’s love refused again—may we also come to the deepest truth of the faith commended to us—which is that all of our falling is a falling into him—and that his love is stronger than death. We don’t hear of Nicodemus again, but I am quietly confident that he experienced a new birth in himself in Christ’s resurrection; just as I am quietly confident that we will also. Easter will come.